

# Mason Ridge Tower Standing Tall Once Again

by Teena Ligman

The Mason Ridge Tower (Indiana) wasn't just restored, it was improved. "We wanted to make it safer than it was, and tried to make sure it would stand for a long time without having to be worked on again," said Jack Bessire, Laborer at Morgan Monroe State Forest. The new safety fence is galvanized safety fencing with a Teflon coating. All the washers and bolts on the fencing, braces, wood deck, and steps are stainless steel.

Bessire noted, "We had money for materials and the labor force was available through the Young Hoosier Conservation Corps (YHCC) so we wanted to do it right." He said the YHCC worked on the tower for two years; four enrollees worked on it this year and four plus the trail crew worked on it the first year. Bessire was pleased with the work of the YHCC. "It was a tough job for kids, a long grueling process with the compressor and sandblaster and the height of the sections - but they hung in there and got the job done." Bessire said the group went through a lot of drill bits. As they went over every part of the tower they found many places where the bolts weren't even through the metal supports. That is no longer the case. Now every metal support and board is bolted and secure. "It wasn't easy drilling through those metal supports, but now the Mason Ridge Tower is sturdier than it ever was in the past. We improved on the design," he said with a grin.

He said the primer that was recommended for use on the tower was really thick - almost a sludge. It ruined everyone's clothes and was a slow tedious job to get the tower coated. The paint went on much easier and standing back now to survey the results, Bessire was obviously pleased with how nice the tower looked.

The cab was renovated with a white oak ceiling and floor. Pike Lumber Company donated the lumber for the cab and Indiana Hardwood Specialist milled it for free. It was treated with four coats of polyurethane and looked beautiful. Treated pine was used for the deck and stairs on the tower. Bessire noted that this style tower had an extra large deck seven levels up, "Which makes it especially nice for people who want to climb to the tree tops but don't want to climb the whole way to the top,"

The windows were fabricated and will be installed when the tower is up. The original windows were lost so the new windows are 16 pane, hinged, pine windows that opened out with Lexan panes. Jeremy Kolaks, Assistant Manager for Morgan Monroe State Forest when the tower project began, scoured the country for excess windows from decommissioned towers. It was an education for Kolaks to learn how many styles and configurations of towers had existed. As he got into the thick of the project he recalled wondering, "just exactly what did I get myself into?" Luckily, John Timmermann and Henry Isenberg from the Forest Fire Lookout Association were very helpful in providing information to Kolaks on tower restoration and ordering materials. Kolaks did find some stored windows in Missouri of the right style but the State of Missouri wasn't willing to part with them in case they needed to replace windows in their towers. So Kolaks had new windows made.

For a job that could potentially have been quite dangerous, there were only two minor accidents. Kolaks said the decision to take the tower down in three pieces made it feasible for the YHCC to work on it. It was still pretty high, but not unreasonable for the youth to climb and work. The only accidents were a sprained wrist and one youth had a drill get away from him and cut his leg.

Jim Allen, Property Manager at Morgan Monroe said other than labor, the expense for rehabilitating the tower was in materials, and the cost of the crane and crew to take the tower down and put it back up.

R.H. Marlin, Inc. took the tower down and put it back up. Greg Young and six men came down with a 70-foot crane and removed the cab and a 50-foot section in June 2009. The sections were taken to the lot behind Fire Headquarters where the work was done. The crew returned on September 30, 2010 to set the tower back on its supports and bolt it back in place.



Allen said the tower had been condemned years ago and he knows people will be glad to have it open again. He noted the Mason Ridge Area is a popular site for people to come picnic and camp, and now they can also climb the tower. The gate to the tower will be locked at night to help deter vandalism. He said one of the best things about the project is it, "gave us an opportunity to give the YHCC something to grab hold of - a monument to their work."

### History of Mason Ridge Tower

The tower was built in 1931. Though the name of the builder has been lost to time, we know the man came in and stayed in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Everitt Lowder who lived on State Route 37 South until the job was complete. He had earlier shipped the tower pieces to the Lowders and their name was stamped on several of the large supports and was still visible today.



Dennis Goen was a towerman for the Mason Ridge Tower in the fall fire season of 1964. The 1964 fall season is still known as one of the worst fire seasons on record. Goen, who now lives in Bloomington was a crewman at Morgan Monroe State Forest at the time. He said the time he spent as a towerman was one of the best of his life.

Goen said his interest in lookout towers and firefighting was encouraged by an old fire warden named Stanley Myers. Myers got he and his twin brother interested in lookout towers and they built a model lookout out of matchsticks. Myers was so impressed with their work he submitted it to the DNR and it went to the State Fair and was put on display. When they got older Myers pulled them out of school to fight fire often and it was always an adventure. When Goen heard about the towerman and crewman job at Morgan Monroe he signed up.

Since the tower was so close to the State Fire Headquarters, he also acted as the relay for all the portable radio units out in the field. Mason Ridge Tower was known as T10. A single lookout tower can only locate a fire's exact location if it is nearby. Otherwise they work on a triangulation system taking readings on smoke with other towers and where the compass readings intersect, identifies the fire location. Goen said he generally worked with the Little Cincinnati Tower (Greene County) which is still standing, or with Weed Patch Tower -T19 (Brown County), Wilbur Tower (Morgan County), or McCormicks Creek Tower- T11 (Owen County). He could triangulate smoke with any of those towers.

Goen remembers in the fall of 1964 it was weeks before they got rain. In fact the day they did he recalls the towerman in T11 calling him and asking if he saw anything on his windows. And he replied "Raindrops from Heaven". He said that year the fire danger was so high he was required to be up in the tower by 8:00 most mornings and often when they had fires and he was relaying on the radio and still spotting fires, he didn't come down until 1:00 the next morning.

Goen later joined the Volunteer Fire Department at Ellettsville and then was able to get on the Bloomington Fire Department in 1969 where he worked for 38-1/2 years. Goen still helps out with local Volunteer Fire Departments. He's pleased to see the Mason Ridge Tower back up and plans to go climb it as soon as he can.

Mason Ridge Tower is open to the public during daylight hours at Morgan Monroe State Forest, just off Indiana State Route 37 between Bloomington and Martinsville.